

# New Testament Baptism

## Editorial

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In 1708 Alexander Mack and seven others gathered on the banks of the Eder River in Schwarzenau, Germany, to begin a new fellowship of believers in Jesus Christ. This group had covenanted together to follow and obey the teachings of the New Testament, and to put aside their previous denominational affiliations.



The public means of this covenant was baptism. The eight persons at Schwarzenau had all received baptism by sprinkling when they were babies. However, as they studied the New Testament, they found no instance—explicit or implicit—that babies were baptized anywhere in New Testament times. Baptism was administered to believers in Jesus Christ. Only those who trusted Christ for salvation and made public acknowledgment of their faith were baptized.

Early Brethren also studied church history and practice, and determined that most indicators pointed to the practice of baptism by immersing a believer three times under the water. This reflected both the literal meaning of the Greek word for baptism and the involvement of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in the work of salvation.

So the original eight agreed together to be baptized in such a fashion, and begin together in their renewed understandings of Christian doctrine. While Alexander Mack was clearly the leader of this group, he desired that they should not be identified by a man's name (as a number of other groups were known). So Mack was baptized by another. One of the others was chosen by lot (drawing on the New Testament practice found in Acts 1, where the early Church selected a replacement for Judas by lot). The one chosen, administered baptism by trine immersion to Mack, and then Mack baptized the other seven.

Throughout most of Brethren history then, baptism by trine immersion has been taught, practiced, and treasured by Brethren people. In recent years, however, our distinctive form of baptism has been neglected or ignored by many within the Church of the Brethren. While at one time perhaps too much emphasis was laid on baptism and its relationship to saving faith, today it appears that little solid teaching is given on this subject.

Some pastors come from other denominations where baptism seems incidental to the church—and other leaders within the church explain that “this is the way we Brethren do baptism”—so scant attention is paid to the biblical and historical reasons for doing so. As a result, many believe that our practice of baptism is merely a denominational oddity. It is downplayed in denominational literature, neglected in pulpits, and sometimes derided in our conversation.

The article in this issue of the **BRF WITNESS** is an attempt to set forth the New Testament teaching on baptism, to draw on some historical data supporting it, and to call on the Church of the Brethren to renew its teaching on this important New Testament rite.

—Craig Alan Myers

# New Testament Baptism

by Craig Alan Myers

Baptism constitutes one of the most readily identifiable Christian rites or ordinances. An “ordinance” is a New Testament practice that symbolizes a great spiritual truth, and usually requires more than one person to practice it. With baptism, we find the great spiritual truth and the need for one to administer baptism and another to receive it.

Baptism has always meant much to Christians in the Church of the Brethren. It is one of our hallmarks as a fellowship. It is one thing that marks us off from other professing Christians, and has since the very beginning when the Church of the Brethren began in August 1708 in Schwarzenau, Germany. Alexander Mack, the first minister of the Brethren, wrote in the first Brethren tract, “We must be baptized according to the teaching of Jesus Christ and the apostles” (***Complete Writings***, page 9). He then announced the intention of the first Brethren to obey Christ in baptism. In the history of the Church of the Brethren, probably no other subject has been considered so thoroughly. In fact, the Church of the Brethren was once called the German Baptist Brethren as a reflection of our mode of baptism. More recently, however, our former teaching on this matter has been neglected, and accommodation to other baptismal understandings has been the rule.

We want to consider some basic Bible teaching on baptism, hear the testimony of the early Church Fathers, and listen to more recent writings on the subject, all dealing with the message and the method of New Testament baptism. It is not our purpose to needlessly offend, but to state clearly and forthrightly what we believe the Bible has to say.

Water baptism is a New Testament rite, intended for those who have committed themselves to Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. It has been taught and practiced, with varying conformity to the New Testament ideal, by nearly every kind of Christian group since the time of the Apostles. Many symbolic meanings have been attached to baptism, and some of these doctrinal teachings have direct bearing on the manner in which water baptism is practiced.

## WHO IS TO BE BAPTIZED?

The New Testament spells out who is to receive the rite of baptism. In Acts 18:8, we see that those baptized there were ones who had heard the Gospel and believed its message. Other passages in Acts tie baptism to believing with an open heart (Acts 16:14,15), and gladly receiving the message of Christ’s death and resurrection (Acts 8:12; 2:41). It is obvious from these instances, that the persons whose baptisms were recorded in Acts, were capable of hearing, understanding, receiving, and believing what Peter, Paul and the other Apostles taught concerning Christ. Acts 2:38 further indicates that baptism is for those who believe the message of Christ, and repent of (turn away from) their sins.

There is no hint whatever that babies were baptized in the New Testament, but only those who were able to consciously trust Christ. The only possible exception to this could be Acts 16:33, where it says, “And immediately he [the Philippian jailer] and all his family was baptized.” But notice that no ages are given. The jailer’s household could have consisted of those who were adults or youth. To be consistent with the historical record in Acts, we would hold that here too, those who were baptized were those who heard the Gospel message and believed it. Read together with Acts 2:38, baptism is for those who are aware of and sorry for their sins which they have committed. Babies, though tainted with the sin of Adam, are unable to repent of or even understand their sinful acts and attitudes. Brother Hartman Rice wrote, “Anywhere baptism is taught or practiced in the Scriptures, it always follows repentance and believing-something that a baby just couldn’t do” (***The Biblical Teaching on Water Baptism***, page 3).

Some denominations hold that baptism in the New Testament [for the Church] corresponds to circumcision in

the Old Testament [for Israel], and thus it is all right to sprinkle or **immerse** babies. But this is a concept foreign to the New Testament history and practice itself, and for this reason was rejected by the early Anabaptists and the early Brethren.

Baptism is commanded for those who repent of their sins and believe in Christ.

### **WHY SHOULD ONE BE BAPTIZED?**

*To follow the example of Jesus*—The Bible says that Jesus Himself, as an example to his disciples, submitted to the water baptism of John the Baptist. As Jesus began His public ministry, He willingly associated to the teaching of John, and gave His affirmation to it. For this, Matthew records that God blessed this baptism with both the audible voice of the Father, and the Holy Spirit “descending like a dove and alighting upon Him” (Matthew 3:15-16). Jesus, being the perfect God man, had no need for baptism as an emblem of repentance and washing away of sin, but He did desire to identify with the faithful teaching of God’s Word in His day.

*It is commanded for believers in Christ*—In the Great Commission, Jesus taught the disciples to go into all the world and make more disciples, “baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). We today are to proclaim the Good News of salvation, and then baptize those who respond in faith in Christ. Mark 16:16 ties baptism with believing in Christ and salvation. Acts 2:38 ties repentance and water baptism together, and Peter tells his hearers that they are to be baptized for [or because of] the remission of sins. Their sins had been forgiven, and baptism was the outward sign of that forgiveness and of their identification with Christ. In Acts 22:16 it symbolizes the washing away of sins, and gives a testimony to the fact that one has confessed Christ. Baptism was for all believers, and was the expected “first step” of the Christian life for everyone who came to Christ.

*Baptism symbolizes death to sin, and rising to new life*—“Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). The faithful Christian in union with Christ, died with Him and so is no longer alive to sin. A Christian has also risen with Christ to new life. Baptism symbolizes this transaction perfectly as one goes under the water (buried) and then rises from the water (resurrected).

*Baptism is putting on Christ* (Galatians 3:27)—It symbolizes our union with Him: dying with Him, suffering His hardship and death; and rising with Christ, being delivered from sin and into a new state of living. In baptism we turn away from sin toward a new life in Christ, and we die to the things of this world.

*Baptism publicly confesses Christ*—Baptism is a public identification with Jesus Christ. After the resurrection of Jesus, we do not find that there were any “secret” believers such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea had been before the Crucifixion. Baptism was an obvious sign of becoming a Christian. It is stating for all, “I am a believer in Jesus Christ; He died for my sins, and He arose for my justification.” Romans 10:9-10 teaches that public confession of Christ is a necessary part of the conversion experience as we acknowledge our sin and His forgiveness.

### **HOW SHOULD WE BE BAPTIZED?**

Most Christians would agree on the necessity and importance of baptism. It is when we begin to discuss the symbolism and mode of baptism that disagreements arise. However, an honest reading of the New Testament and of history supports baptism by immersion.

*Baptism testifies to a burial and a resurrection*—Romans 6:3-5 speaks of being buried and resurrected with Christ, and Colossians 2:12 reinforces this. When one is buried he goes under the ground or into the earth in some fashion. Baptism in water, then, most fully shows this burial and then the resurrection or coming up out of the ground. To fully show this testimony, there should be enough water used to show the burial (descent into) and the resurrection (rising up from).

*Baptism symbolizes a washing*—Ananias told Saul, “Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (Acts 22:16). Outward water baptism cannot physically wash away sins, but it relates what Christ has done for us in washing away our sins with His blood. Washing means to thoroughly cleanse something, through immersing it in water. One washes a garment by thoroughly getting it wet, and plunging it under the water.

*The Greek word “baptizo” always means to immerse*—It signifies a cleansing by washing. There is no suggestion of merely sprinkling water on a new believer, or of pouring a small amount of water on one. It means “to dip, to immerge, to submerge” (J. H. Thayer, ***A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament***).

## WHAT MODE OF IMMERSION SHOULD BE USED?

Even those who agree on baptism by immersion may differ on the specific form or method of performing that immersion. Again, grammar, theology, and history point to a specific kind of immersion for baptism of New Testament believers—trine (or triune) immersion. Trine immersion means being immersed three times in one ritual. It is not three baptisms, but one baptism with three separate actions.

*The Greek word “baptizo” requires more than one immersion.* The basic word for wash is “bapto.” When the “izo” ending is added, it signifies a repeated action. So “baptizo” (in Greek) means “to dip or immerse repeatedly” (***A Greek-English Lexicon***). Anyone familiar with koine Greek in the first century would have an immediate understanding of “baptizo,” and would see it as requiring a repeated immersion into water. The Greek word for “sprinkling” is “rantizo,” and would have been used in the New Testament had the early church used that rite.

*The Great Commission requires trine immersion.* Matthew 28:19 says that we are to baptize “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” A simple diagram of that phrase shows it to have three separate prepositions (even in Greek), which would require the baptismal action be done as one rite with three separate actions or immersions. Some recent translations overlook the repeated prepositions in this verse, and so add to the confusion over the proper mode of baptism.

Honoring the Trinity calls for trine immersion. Again, Matthew 28:19 recognizes each member of the Godhead—and our initiatory rite into the Trinitarian Christian faith reflects our belief in the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All three Persons of the Trinity are mentioned because each One has a part in our salvation. God the Father is the Architect of the plan of salvation; God the Son came to earth and paid the bill for salvation; and God the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin and brings about our surrender to Christ, and applies the work of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection to our souls and lives.

The text in Matthew 28 requires Trinitarian action in order to fully complete the Lord’s command. By trine immersion—one ritual with three actions—we recognize and give honor and worship to each member of the Godhead. We proclaim ourselves as obedient Trinitarians. As we believe in the Trinity, we should symbolize the Trinity in our entrance into the Trinitarian faith.

*Trine immersion can be traced back to the Apostles.* The early Church Fathers wrote of baptism frequently. One of the first mentions of baptism outside the New Testament was in the ***Didache***. Sometimes called ***The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles***, this was a kind of pastor’s manual for early church leaders, and was written about A.D. 100. It says, “But concerning baptism, thus baptize ye: having first recited all these precepts, baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in running water.” Almost a direct quote of Matthew’s Gospel, the implication is strongly for trine immersion as the preferred means of baptism.

*Tertullian, A.D. 160-220:* “Jesus gave as his last command that they should immerse into the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, not into one person. Therefore, all who believed were immersed. For we are immersed, not once but thrice, at the naming of every person of the Trinity.”

*Augustine*, A.D. 354-430, “In this font, before we dipped your whole body, we asked you, ‘Believest thou in God the omnipotent Father?’ After you declared that you believed, we immersed three times your heads in **the sacred** font ... You are rightly **immersed three times**, **you** who receive baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, who rose the third day **from the dead**” (*Sermon on the Mystery of Baptism*).

*Jerome*, A.D. 340-420: “We are thrice dipped in water that the mystery of the Trinity may appear to be but one, and therefore though we be thrice put under the water to represent the mystery of the Trinity, yet it is reputed to be but one baptism.”

*Chrysostom*, A.D. 347-407 “Christ delivered to his disciples one baptism in three immersions when he said to them, ‘Go and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.’”

These were ancient teachers. Numerous others may be quoted in similar fashion in support of trine immersion. “Historically, the early authors and Church fathers unite together in giving a vast amount of testimony supporting Trine Immersion, along with countless historians throughout the ages” (Hodge, *Could It be Three?* page 31).

We may turn to a more recent respected Christian preacher, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. “When Mr. Wesley baptized adults professing faith in Christ, he chose to do it by trine immersion if the person would submit to it, judging this to be the apostolic method” (*Moore’s Life of Wesley*, Volume 1, page 425).

*Trine immersion is the only form of baptism accepted nearly universally as valid by Christian bodies.* While our primary appeal is to the Scriptures, it is useful to consider the attitude of other professing Christian bodies. The Eastern Orthodox Church (the Greek church), which prizes many ancient traditions, baptizes by trine immersion, even though it performs the rite for babies. The church followed trine immersion for a thousand years or more. Even those churches that have abandoned immersion, and practice sprinkling, do it three times.

Finally, *trine immersion by a forward motion is the literal application of the Scripture.* Romans 6:5 indicates that we are united in the likeness of His death. John 19:30 sheds light on this by saying, “And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit.” He bowed His head—a forward movement. We too, are to receive baptism in the same way, bowing our heads in a forward movement. Tertullian wrote, “The Christians were baptized by bowing down with great simplicity, and without pomp or many words.”

## WHAT SHOULD I DO?

If you have trusted Christ, and not yet been baptized, then seek out a sound congregation and request baptism. If you have received some other form of baptism, then it is altogether appropriate to conform to the teaching of the New Testament on the mode of baptism. The basis for such conformity is the following:

*The example of Jesus*—He certainly had no need to be baptized, yet did it out of obedience and identification with God’s people. If one identifies with the Church of the Brethren and its teachings, then that identification should be with the basic rites and ordinances of the Church.

*The example of the Apostles*—In Acts 19:1-6, we find an instance where believers were baptized once as *believers*, but then were more fully instructed and then baptized again to reflect their deeper understanding of the Gospel. There is no New Testament prohibition on seeking proper baptism.

*The example of the early church*—Persons were baptized again if their first baptism was not conducted according to Scriptural standards. It was only later, as the church became more involved with the world, that baptism took on significance as a strict onetime only event.

*Illumination of the Scriptures*—The Holy Spirit leads us all to correct any deficiencies in belief and practice as we



mature in the Christian life.

The Bible teaches trine immersion, and those who have not received this rite should be baptized by trine immersion. This does not imply that some previous ceremony was not meaningful, but simply that ritual did not fully portray New Testament baptism.

“Many Christians emotionally react to the invitation to be baptized by trine immersion if they have already been baptized as believers in another way. They may even feel that to be “rebaptized” would be to repudiate their former public confession of Christ. But this is simply not true. Spiritually discerning Christians will always act in light of new biblical insights. If they have discovered, through studying God’s Word, that trine immersion is the form which Christ really commanded the Church to observe, then they will realize that they are not actually experiencing a “rebaptism,” but instead, for the first time in their lives as believers, true Christian baptism. This should bring great joy rather than resentment.” (John C. Whitcomb, ***Baptism and Church Membership***, page 2. Dr. Whitcomb was formerly a professor at Grace Theological Seminary in Winona Lake, Indiana.)

Our concern about the method of baptism is that, if we desire to be obedient, then we should follow Christ’s instructions as closely as possible. We do not say that people baptized by other modes are automatically excluded from the blessings of salvation, but we believe that the teaching of trine immersion is most closely in keeping with the teaching of the New Testament. “[It] proves itself to be the best and most complete way to carry out all the Scriptures command in relation to the rite of baptism” (Hodge, ***Could It Be Three?***, page 31).

May the Church recover, uphold, and forthrightly teach baptism by trine immersion as important for every member and minister, and may that baptism truly reflect our Triune God, to the praise of His glory.

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For further reference, a good source of information on baptism and the other ordinances is ***God’s Means of Grace***, by C. F. Yoder, 1908. It is available from Brethren Encyclopedia, Inc. A brief but useful recent treatment is ***Could It Be Three?*** by Timothy Mark Hodge, published by CE National, Winona Lake, IN.

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